

THE STUDY OF MAN

THE IDEA OF "RACE" DIES HARD

Current Report on an Old Controversy

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THE belief that the behavior of individuals is a biological legacy passed on from one generation to the next runs tenaciously through all our history. At its most dramatic, the idea is the stimulus for Nazi atrocities. But in a more persistent form that is not eliminated by military conquest, "racism" in any one of its many variants is still with us.

The persuasive argument of science which emphatically denies the popular notion of race—that behavior differences are explained by inherited physical differences—has constantly yielded to the more clear-cut evidence of people's senses that a Negro is different from a Chinese, that a Spaniard can be set apart from an American Indian—that, in truth, it is often possible to tell a Jew from a Gentile, just by looking at

THE concept of "race," with its implications of superiority and inferiority, has been the target of attack by liberal social scientists for three decades, and the battle has gone on with renewed vigor since Hitler. But, paradoxically, race still remains an accepted concept even for scientists. Why this is so, and where the scientific debate about race stands today, is the subject of this appraisal by MELVIN J. TUMIN. Mr. Tumin, assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at Princeton University, here examines the latest views held by anthropologists and social scientists. Mr. Tumin is the author (with J. W. Bennett) of *Social Life: An Introductory General Sociology*, recently published by Knopf, and has begun work on a *Sociology of Demoralization*. His articles have appeared in various professional journals, and he has published a short story in *Partisan Review*. He was born in Newark in 1919, studied at Wisconsin and Northwestern Universities, and taught at Wayne University before coming to Princeton.

him. If this latter attitude—at least in the hands of its more reasonable proponents—neither implies a biological source for group differences nor a judgment of social inferiority or superiority, its garbled popular version inevitably has these overtones. Moreover, such vulgar racist reasoning has a way of confirming itself. Thus, in the South, Negroes are said to be congenitally dirty, uneducated, diseased, and disgruntled. By reason of these alleged disabilities they are poorly housed, inadequately schooled, improperly cared for, and—to complete the chain—are in fact disgruntled with their circumstances.

CURIOUSLY, the naturalists—biologists and physical anthropologists—have been in part responsible for perpetuating this belief that biological attributes are closely linked with behavior; paradoxically, even those among them whose theories attacked this very concept. Physical anthropologists, interested in bringing order into the variety of human physical types, have categorized, classified, and created ideal types to which various people and groups more or less conform. To be sure, even the simplest technical terms are not widely used: "Negroid," "Caucasoid," or "Mongoloid" remain in the high school textbooks. But their lay translation—"black," "white," and "yellow"—has become a conversational *fait accompli*. The prestige of science thus lends respectability to terms almost inevitably used to buttress unscientific, self-confirming attitudes.

In another sense too, the social scientists have given considerable sanction and dignity to racist ideas so popular with laymen. Thus a vast amount of time and energy has been spent combating the popular misconceptions that arose

from the results of intelligence tests in World War I. In attacking these unsavory conclusions the social scientists too quickly accepted the racist terms themselves. Busied with explaining away white-Negro differences in intelligence, the anthropologists neglected to attack the basic assumption implied in "white" and "black": the conception that regards the group as a cohesive and, for all practical purposes, uniform, undifferentiated blur of like-minded, like-bodied, like-thinking people, whose *group* intelligence must be vindicated by the weight of scientific evidence. Answering charges, they did not feel it urgent to consider whether, in any scientific sense, there are any such groups at all.

One suspects that many anthropologists have accepted these loaded race terms largely as a matter of tactics. It is easier—they perhaps reason—to prove that group *differences* are non-existent than it is to convince anyone that the very image of these people as a group does violence to the vast differences between all the members of the group. In their eagerness and good will, too many social scientists have accepted the terms of the controversy without realizing these terms were unfounded and damaging to their liberal and democratic argument.

Thus for two decades now, college students have been exposed to the weighty and convincing counter-arguments of such anti-racist social scientists as Boas, Herskovits, Benedict, Julian Huxley, Paul Radin, Otto Klineberg, M. F. Ashley-Montagu, and others. In the university classroom and in their reading, they have learned the fallacies of stereotyping groups. They have learned to apply the doctrine of cultural relativity to human affairs, and to understand thereby that the habits of different human groups are worthy of respect—and in any case are not fixed by biology. They have had imparted to them Boas's finding on the plasticity, under different cultural conditions, of such presumed biologically fixed measurements as the cephalic index (the proportion of the head's breadth to its length).

Despite all this pedagogical effort, there has as yet been no apparent popular tendency to stop using the traditional term "race" (with all its inevitable trail of biased overtones), or to stop thinking of mankind as divided into three basic groups: white, black, and yellow. In fact, it may well be that the anthropologists' incessant concentration on group differences has been an important factor in the widespread fixation on the biological boundaries of different groups.

The leap from the *known* insignificance of "race" differences to the recognition of their *actual* insignificance for human capacity and behavior is not often made. Instead, the taken-for-granted differences are "tolerated" rather than treated as inconsequential. And the self-confirming circle is started. The "dirty Negro" is restricted to slum areas, the "uneducated Negro" is sent to an overcrowded or to no school. . . .

The recognition of this dilemma has led to proposals of semantic reform: banish the word "race" from the vocabulary of scientists. Julian Huxley and M. F. Ashley-Montagu have reiterated the suggestion first made by J. Deniker that the term "ethnic group" be substituted for "race." In this way they hoped to bring into usage a neutral term or at least to replace a word that is loaded with invidious distinctions which have in fact never been substantiated by science. But it almost seems as if the effectiveness of the proposal to ban "race" from usage depends, like the similar proposal to forbid "armaments" and "war," on the simultaneous and universal compliance by all involved. These conditions of success are not very likely to be fulfilled in the immediate future.

ALSO, the belief in the validity of the race concept is in no sense dead in reputable scientific circles. Huxley and Ashley-Montagu by no means represent the only school of thought on the question. R. Ruggles Gates, a British geneticist who has recently published a monumental volume on *Human Ancestry* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1948), is also disturbed by the inadequacy of the term. But he substitutes in its stead a classification of human beings into *species*, a larger and presumably more fixed biological category than race. It is worth examining Gates' ideas in some detail, since they provide a prism through which many of the current theories of "race" and biological group differences are refracted.

The initial shock that one feels at hearing of this further division of human beings into species has a source other than the problems of classification it raises. In the first place, to talk of different species of men is a suggestion not often made in an age that is marked by the supremacy of the democratic state. Secondly, so much "good will" capital has been built on establishing the unity of mankind, that Gates' idea looms ominously as a threat to the tremendous investments that have been made in this

venture. Thirdly, there is the very real danger that these different species would—as so often happens—be placed in a hierarchical structure of inferior and superior, at least in the eyes of the world in which they lived.

Concretely Gates proposes the division of man, until now subsumed under the single species of *homo sapiens*, into five species: *Homo australicus*, *homo capensis*, *homo africanus*, *homo mongoloideus*, and *homo caucasicus*. He suggests, in addition, that *homo sapiens* be retained as the nomenclature expressing super-species, “including all living species, if desired.”

In contrast to traditional anthropological classification, Gates's system, besides substituting the term “species” for “race,” adds the species *capensis*, or Boskop man, to the traditional Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid, and residual Australoid categories.

In effect, Gates is saying that the division of man into physical types is made more intelligible—and this presumably is the purpose of classificatory science—when five, rather than three or four ideal types are used; and further, that it is more accurate to call these groups “species” than “races.” Gates argues that by using the word “species” he does away with the false, unscientific connotation of the term “race”: that these five groups have common ancestry from which there has been a simple divergence, and replaces it with the idea that “primary so-called races of living man have risen independently from different times.”

It is eminently reasonable, Gates asserts, to claim independent origin, plus considerable divergence from these origins, for the various present-day “species” of man. “We recognize different species, and even genera, of man co-existing in Pleistocene times and giving rise to such different types as the Australian Bushman and the Caucasian from different lines of descent, yet as a convention arising from man's self-conceit, we try to crowd them together into one species, implying simple divergence from one ancestry. The evidence is clear, however, that the primary so-called races of living man have arisen independently from different ancestral species in different continents at different times.” Gates votes in support of Darwin's position that “a naturalist might feel himself fully justified in ranking the races of man as distinct species.”

However, as Gates writes in continuation, “[Darwin] finally decides against this procedure . . . Darwin recognizes ‘weighty arguments’

for recognizing human species, but ‘insuperable difficulties’ in defining them. He concludes that the term sub-species might be used ‘with much propriety,’ but admits that ‘from long habit the term “race” will perhaps always be employed.’ . . . On page 229 he [Darwin] says that those who admit evolution ‘will feel no doubt that all the races of man are descended from a single primitive stock.’” At another point, Gates quotes Darwin as saying: “So again it is almost a matter of indifference whether the so-called races of man are thus designated, or are ranked as species or sub-species; but the latter term appears the most appropriate.”

It is difficult to see what comfort Gates derives in these citations from Darwin. It seems quite clear that for Darwin the matter was almost purely a decision of semantic convenience. Moreover, it is apparent that Darwin pointed toward a *single* origin rather than *separate* origins for the various human groups, however they were termed.

Gates' supporting evidence for his thesis sometimes takes oddly naive turns. He cites Darwin, again, on the differences in the mental and psychological characteristics among various groups of men: “He [Darwin] says everyone is struck with the contrast between the taciturn, even morose, aborigines of South America, and the light-hearted talkative Negroes. . . .”

This incredibly naive kind of “racist” psychology is understandable in Darwin, *circa* 1870, but an utter anomaly in a 1948 book on *Human Ancestry*. No better summary of Gates' reasoning is possible than his own words themselves when he says: “My contact with the Loucheux Indians during an expedition down the Mackenzie River in 1928 led me to regard them as temperamentally different from all other Indians, east or west. Living near the Arctic Circle, they had the lively extrovert mentality of the Eskimos. *One was left wondering whether this resulted from their Arctic environment or from crosses with the Eskimos.*” (My italics—M.T.)

ALL this aside, however, one is left with Gates's major contention that the human animal is too diverse in its physical makeup to warrant the term “races,” with the implication that it carries of single origin in a human species, and only minor divergences in the course of evolution.

The notion that men have descended from different origins, rather than from single origins,

technically known as the polygenetic theory (by contrast with monogenesis), can be shown—it seems to me—to be an utterly useless and fruitless problem. For the answer certainly seems to depend quite simply upon how far back in the evolutionary sequence one wishes to go in tracing origins. No evolutionists—not even Gates—would claim that the different groups of man come originally, let us say, from different groups of simpler pre-primate mammals. Presumably, early man's ancestors were common rather than divergent at least at some point in evolutionary time. The argument of polygenesis vs. monogenesis, therefore, reduces itself to an argument as to *which* point in evolutionary time should be taken as the proper point of departure for an analysis of human ancestry.

Gates contends, by contrast, that one must assume different ancestors for various groups of men if order and sense are to be found in present diversities. This, of course, utilizes the assumption that the present differences are too great to be accounted for in terms of common origins. Clearly, there is no large body of opinion among anthropologists which considers present differences so wide and various as to demand the assumption of multiple origins. The parsimonious principle of science recommends that, if sense can be made out of the present variety with the assumption of only a single origin, the simpler assumption is certainly preferable. Accordingly, the case for the assumption of multiple rather than single origins would seem at best very questionable. For Gates does agree, after all, that it is the primary concern in this argument to make sense out of present-day variations.

However, the question of multiple or single origin is not crucial to Gates' approach. For present-day differences between the "races" could be so great, and the degree of similarity within the group—the qualities and characteristics that group members share in common—so impressive as to argue for Gates' concept of "species."

But just what are these commonly shared characteristics? What are the systematic grounds on which Gates asserts that what were previously considered "races" are more accurately "species"? Gates makes explicit his criteria. He accepts the definition of Tate Regan: "A species is a community, or a number of related communities, whose distinctive morphological characteristics are in the opinion of competent systematists sufficiently definite to entitle it or

them to a specific name." (Gates, together with other geneticists, holds that inter-species fertility—according to which all types that could produce fertile offspring with each other were considered in the same species—is not a good or sufficient criterion of species.)

Now if such a definition is to be used to determine unambiguously just what is a species, it seems essential that some of its terms be more vigorously defined: (1) What constitutes a community? (2) What is the quality and quantity of relationship that must be present before communities may be said to be related? (3) In how many and what kinds of characteristics should a community be similar to merit a specific name? (4) How much difference is "sufficiently definite" to warrant a specific name? (5) Assume, hypothetically, the problem of classifying two groups of apparently related animals: Group A exhibits similarities X, Y, and Z with Group B, but these similarities are only rough and approximate. On the other hand, Group A exhibits similarity U with Group C, but this similarity is "pronounced" and "marked." How much, by way of classification, shall one *pronounced* similarity be weighted as against *three* only *rough* and *approximate* similarities? (6) What are the criteria for a competent systematist? (7) Do these criteria of competence allow for disagreements among systematists without these disagreements being taken to signify incompetence?

ALL science proceeds, in the last analysis, on the basis of agreement among equally competent observers who *pursue the same methods of investigation*. In the taxonomy of those who would separate races and species, however, there are no clearly described operations that equally competent observers can repeat, nor any clearly formulated criteria by which other observers could determine whether the ascription of a species name to a given group is or is not justified. These practices seem to be more like poetic sense impressionism than science; it appears that whether or not a group should be given a specific name is a matter about which one taxonomist must *persuade* rather than *convince* other taxonomists. Thus the method of a so-called scientific taxonomy becomes more similar than it should to the method of deciding, say, whether a voice sounds like "rat's feet over broken glass" or like "liquid notes that close the eye of day."

It is precisely out of recognition of these

problems that a "new systematics," by-passing the whole question of defining a species, has been developed. Th. Dobzhansky (*Genetics and the Origin of Species*, Columbia, 1941) writes: "Of late, the futility of attempts to find a universally valid criterion for distinguishing species has come to be fairly generally, if reluctantly, recognized." And Ernst Mayr writes in *Systematics and the Origins of Species* (Columbia, 1942). "We have an almost unlimited diversity of opinion in answer to such questions as what is a species? How do species originate? Are the systematic categories natural? And so forth."

"Systematics" has proceeded adequately without the concept of species, since in any case, to quote Ernst Mayr again, "The importance of the species as such is reduced [today], since most of the actual work is done with subdivisions of the species, such as subspecies and populations. . . . The choosing of the correct name for the analyzed taxonomic unit no longer occupies the central position of all systematic work and is less often subject to argument between fellow workers."

If the above considerations are sensible, it further follows that any argument Gates makes about how many species of man there are, is not much more than semantic cant which is of limited interest even to his own colleagues. This holds especially for his insistence that interspecies sterility is not a good criterion for the identification of species, since, in fact, the species which are presumably fertile or sterile with each other are not objectively isolatable and identifiable to begin with.

There is very little reason, then, for assuming that Gates' book, despite its impressive scholarly apparatus, makes any contribution to either systematic taxonomy or the clarification of human relationships. And since the social implications of using the term "species of man" are so considerable and so potentially destructive, it seems to me completely reasonable to recommend a thorough-going disavowal of the point of view espoused in Gates' book.

THESE same points that disprove Gates' argument are applicable to the whole problem of into how many, if any, different races human beings may be classified. As with the criteria of species, so with the criteria of race, the principles of identification are so ambiguous or so general or so diverse from one anthropologist to the other that the suggestion to drop the

term from the parlance of anthropology makes taxonomic and semantic sense, even if in fact it is most difficult to realize. Take for example the usual definition of race, which reads that a race is "a relatively large number of people who share in common a number of stable inherited traits which distinguish them as a group from other groups with different hereditary endowment."

One might again quite reasonably ask: how large is a "relatively large number of people"? How much commonalty is meant by "sharing in common"? How many traits shall this indeterminate number of people share in common? How stable shall these traits be? How distinguishable from other groups must they be before they merit a specific racial name?

Nowhere in the research and writing can one find an unambiguous clarification of the problems raised by these questions. Dobzhansky has suggested that we consider a race as any group of people who share a number of genes in common. But using this criterion, it would make as much sense to talk of dimpled-knee races, large-toe races, bushy-eyebrowed races, crooked-teeth races, etc., as it does to talk of black or white or yellow skin-color races. For dimpled knees, crooked teeth, and the like, are as much under gene control as any of the more frequently encountered criteria of race membership such as skin color.

Skin color, hair texture, stature, and the others, find their way into scientific usage more often than dimpled knees and crooked teeth, not because they are better, more scientific criteria from a genetic point of view, but because the dead weight of both scientific and popular past usage is in their favor. In its failure to point this out, anthropological taxonomy has fallen into the trap of an unfounded traditionalism with all of its odious social consequences.

It is equally foolish of course to deny—in a burst of democratic zeal—that there are no physical or cultural differences among various groups of men the world over. And if for some problems, classifying these groups helps to illuminate a particular question, it is perfectly reasonable to engage in classification. However, I know of no problem in the social sciences today that is fruitfully served by classification based on inherited physical resemblances and differences. Yet the energy and time of a large number of practicing social scientists of the last quarter century has by necessity been de-

voted to demonstrating the uselessness of racial characteristics—such is the strength of their lay and professional "racist" opponents.

WE RETURN to our initial point: the biologist and the social scientist are in measure responsible for the persistent and incorrect use of "race." They are, at least, the authors of the term even if its use in the world has been stretched far beyond their expectations. One way that this popular conception of "race" can be attacked is by dropping the word from the vocabulary of the social scientist. Even more important is the need for continuing, never-ending emphasis that "race problems" are cultural problems with biological identification marks, and that "race relations" are cultural or ethnic relations.

Such a concerted effort might well transform the traditional discussions of "race relations" into discussions of the problems of *group adjustment*, rather than continue in the vicious circle of pro-race and counter-race argument. This would be an important contribution to

cutting the self-confirming chain reaction which begins with the idea of different "races," moves on to assume real and significant differences, leads to discrimination against presumably inferior groups, thus creates real behavior differences between groups, and finally concludes by reinforcing the concept of "race"—because the group in fact becomes different and recognizable.

The process of distinguishing among individuals and groups is indigenous to social life. Yet at the same time it is also possible to make these distinctions in a variety of ways, with a variety of connotations, and, most important, with a variety of intentions. To reiterate, since nothing is gained by the use of such unscientific and unpreventably invidious terms as "race" or "species," they might very profitably be dropped from the scientific vocabulary dealing with group differences and group interaction. We may then be freer to intensify the study of, and engender respect for, those *real* group differences that are the soil and raw material of democratic society.